DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 217 370 CS 006 546

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TITLE Internal and External Evaluation in Literary Narrative.
PUB DATE Jul 81
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English (10th, Laramie, WY, July 6-10, 1981). Parts may not reproduce clearly.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Processes; Higher Education; *Narration; Reading Comprehension; Reading Instruction; *Reading Processes; Structural Linguistics; Teaching Methods; Theories; Writing (Composition); *Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Labov (William); *Reader Text Relationship

ABSTRACT

A theory of textual processing signals--cues to guide the response of any reader to a narrative text--can be evolved from Gerald Prince's theory of reading interludes and William Labov's work on narrative evaluation. An examination of these signals in two personal experience narratives written by students in remedial and freshman writing courses and in a narrative passage from Philip Roth's "Defender of the Faith" suggests that textual processing signals could serve as a heuristic for teaching certain aspects of narrative writing. Labov describes several forms of narrative evaluation. Evaluative commentary can be either external (explicit commentary) or internal (evaluative statements embedded in the story). Sentence Internal Evaluative Devices are even more deeply embedded than Internal Evaluative Commentary. These include three kinds of intensifiers--expressive phonology, repetition, ritual rejection--and six verb phrase comparators--futures, negatives, commands, questions, modals, and comparatives. It is not the frequency of evaluators that distinguishes the Roth passage from the students' writing, but its sophisticated layering or doubling of Sentence Internal Comparators. These conclusions suggest the usefulness of textual processing signals in the teaching of narrative prose. (JL)

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Internal and External Evaluation in Literary Narrative

Charlotte Thralls

One of the most important contributions of recent literary theory has been to establish the interaction of reader and text as a dynamic communication model. With such a dynamic model, meaning is not merely authorial intention or a single determinate meaning, which the reader extracts from the text, so that communication moves one way, from text to reader. Rather meaning making is a process, whereby the reader acts as a context for meaning production. The reader's context may be his personal psychological history, his literary competence, or his place in history and culture. The danger, however, of welcoming the reader as an active participant in the communication model is the tendency to forget the text and allow meaning to slip into reader subjectivity and arbitrariness, a charge issued against, for example, Derrida and the post-structuralists. The question arises, then, in what manner does the text guide or restrict possible meaning production.

The structuralists, by maintaining a balance between the reader's contribution and textual pressures, have taken important steps toward working out the role of the text in meaning production. T. Todorov, Gerald Prince, and Seymour Chatman, among other structuralists working with narrative theory, identify narrative texts in terms of identifiable structures that generate possible meanings. Although readers from different historical periods may have a variety

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of interpretations, textual restrictions do limit what meanings are possible. These restrictions occur in the text in the form of structures that signal how the text is to be constructed or processed by readers.

One instance of such a signal is Gerald Prince's concept of "reading interludes." Reading interludes are passages in narratives that explicitly refer to or comment on the meaning or function of other passages.[1] Note in the following passage.

> It was a mystery to me why Joan took John's berating so calmly whenever they played tennis

Here, the clause, "It was a mystery," directly comments on how the situation between Joan and John is to be understood. Reading interludes, Prince concludes, are "an index of the stance taken by the narrative with regard to its own communicability and readability, as an indication of how it ostensibly wants to be read and a cue to a kind of program it considers most useful for its decoding."[2] In other words, despite different possible interpretations of a given narrative clause, texts do provide signals for readers which function as the text reading itself.

Prince's notion of reading interludes is an important step toward designating pressures the text itself places on meaning production, but reading interludes account for only one type of reading signal. I wish to propose some additional structures, which I shall call "textual processing signals," all of which act as cues to guide the response of any reader to a narrative text. I shall identify these textual processing signals in two personal experience narratives written by students in my remedial and freshman level writing courses and in a narrative passage from Philip Roth's "Defender of the Faith." I wish to suggest also that the processing signals I present could serve as a

heuristic for teaching certain aspects of narrative writing in composition and creative writing courses.

Although William Lobov's work with oral narrative does not address the issue of meaning production, his research is of interest as a basis for the textual processing signals I wish to develop. Working with sub-culture dialects of American English, considered an aberration of standard English by many, Lobov has attempted to show that dialect variations are a reflection of a speaker's place in a social hierarchy. His research has done much to dispel the notion that substandard English is a reflection of poor verbal skills. While this conclusion is an important one, I wish to emphasize how his structure of narrative evaluation constitutes a partial taxonomy of textual processing signals in written narrative. Mary Louise Pratt, in Toward A Speech Act Theory of Literary Narrative, has illustrated quite convincingly that Lobov's narrative evaluators do apply to written narrative. I do not wish to repeat her argument--that oral and written narrative are structurally and functionally very much alike[3]--but I would like to review Lobov's structure of narrative evaluation.

By narrative evaluation Lobov means the various ways in which narrators reveal their evaluation of events and states reported. According to Lobov, evaluation is most likely to appear in the Evaluation section of a story, that section at the close of a narrative where a narrator sums up his judgments. In the following short narrative, we do find evaluation concentrated in lines 24-27, but we also find evaluation scattered throughout.

SKIING FOR THE FIRST TIME
(remedial level narrative)

When I was about thirteen years old, my parents decided it was time for me to learn how to snow ski. All of my older brothers knew how to ski, so they were the ones that taught me how. It was funny because they all had their own way of skiing, [and trying to learn how to ski with four different methods was [quite (II-A-1)] difficult.] (I-A)

We drove out to the ski lodge about the third day of Christmas vacation. On the way to the lodge, [I was so excited about learning how to ski (I-A)] that I was jumping around in the car acting [like a wild man (I-A, II-B-6).] When we got to the lodge I looked down a slope to see what I was getting into, and I saw a [steep (II-A-1)] slope full of bumps. All of a sudden, I looked down the steep hill for the longest run and saw how steep the hill was and all the bumps and curves that [could get (II-B-5)] in the way. Then one of my brothers showed me the beginners' hill. The beginners' hill was a [soft (II-A-1)] incline with no bumps or curves on it [which really put my mind at ease (I-B-4)]

I was fitted with my first pair of skiis and boots. Once I had gotten these, I was ready to learn how to ski. We went over to the beginners'hill and I put on my skis. My brother gave me some last minute instructions, and then he told me to ski down the hill. I started down the hill and I [didn't get (II-B-2)] three feet before I landed flat on my head. My skis came flying off and one of them went sliding down the hill because it was not hooked up to my leg the right way. [I felt like burying my head in the snowbank and dying.] (I) I wanted to quit right there, but my brothers [wouldn't (II-B-2)] let me. They got me back on my skis and made me ski the rest of the day, despite the chance I [might wipe out (II-B-5)] again.

I'm glad they did this because if they had let me do what I wanted to do, I [would have (II-B-5)] left right then and [never put (II-B-2)] a foot back into a ski again. They kept me going the rest of the day and showed me that I [could become (II-B-5)] better through practice.

Evaluative Commentary--5
Sentence Internal Evaluators--10
Words--395

Numbers and letters in parentheses refer to types of evaluators as identified on pp. 4-8.

I. Evaluative Commentary [4]

A. External

Although evaluation does occur throughout this simple narrative, the evaluation is primarily of one type: explicit commentary, whereby the narrator

asserts the point of the story. This overt commentary constitutes a major type of textual processing signal. By asserting certain judgments, such as "I was starting to get scared," the narrator attributes importance to the events he reports. Although some of us may view the narrator's profession of fear as humorous and others as cowardly, depending upon our own experience and values, such explicit passages guide and restrict the range of meaning we may make.

External evaluative commentary is, however, only one type of narrative evaluator. In his effort to classify the way narrators can reveal their attitudes, Lobov presents two additional types of narrative evaluation: Internal Commentary and Sentence-Internal devices. All are defined and illustrated below.

B. Internal Evaluative Commentary: Internal evaluators are less obvious than external evaluation because they are embedded in the story. Lobov provides three types of internal evaluation to which I have added Gerald Prince's concept of "reading interludes."

1. Narrator presents evaluative statements as having occurred to him at the time of events reported.

   She had no sympathy. My best friend thought I was kidding. So I sat there thinking, "It will surely go away," but it didn't.

2. Narrator presents evaluation as statement addressed to another character.

   She was a beautiful woman who made a point of touching Jack's shoulder each time she laughed. Later, I mentioned to Jack how much he seemed to enjoy her fawning.

3. Narrator attributes evaluative remarks to a witness or neutral observer in the story.

Standing around the coffee urn, the senior faculty mingled self-consciously with graduate students. They talked of current literary theory, questioning the need for so much abstraction.

4. Reading interludes: passages that directly comment on the meaning or function of other passages.

He won a purple ribbon, which was second place.

II. Sentence Internal Evaluative Devices

Sentence-Internal evaluators are even more deeply embedded than Internal Evaluative Commentary. Lobov designates two types, Intensifiers and Comparators, each of which can be identified by its relation to the verb phrase construction of the narrative clause.

A. Intensifiers

1. Expressive phonology

Without warning a car stopped along the road. A cop! I hit the dirt! (exclamation mark)

He's sooo tall. (elongated vowel)

2. Repetition

Suddenly I came to a ditch; it wasn't just an ordinary ditch. It was a sewer ditch. (repetition through "it" construction and "ditch."

3. Ritual interjection

The next thing I knew, I was standing in about four feet of water, sewer water. Damn! ("Damn!" is an interjection, but the passage also employs repitition.)

B. Comparators. According to Lobov, most verb phrase constructions, other than the simple past, perform an evaluative function. Comparators, then, are verb phrases other than the simple past and include negatives, futures, commands, questions, and modals.

1. Futures. The verb phrase brings up what could happen, but hasn't yet.

There was one guy in particular that I will be friends with forever.

2. Negatives. The verb phrase brings up what didn't happen, but could have.

I didn't think I had a chance.

3. Commands. The verb phrase projects future possible events.

Go ahead; he'll never know.

4. Questions. The verb produces future events.

What if he comes back, and I'm not there.

5. Modals. Of most significance is the subjunctive, which expresses a wish or contrary to fact condition.

The boy demanded that his wish be obeyed.

6. Comparatives. All similie and metaphors function as comparatives.

Clouds of silt rose like shadows from the bottom of the river.

The six Comparators are the most deeply embedded of the evaluators presented here. Comparators function evaluatively by referring to hypothetical events that are then compared to events in the present of the narrative. For example, in the negative, "I didn't think I had a chance," the text asks the reader to process the signals by comparing what the narrator does not believe will occur with what actually occurs. Sometimes the distance is short between the time the negative is raised and resolved, but some narratives will withhold the actual outcome of the negative speculation until the end of the narrative. In either case, as with the other comparators, the verb construction of a negative requires processing through juxtaposition of the actual and the hypothetical.

In the simple narrative below, written by a student in freshman composition, Sentence-Internal devices appear far more frequently than in the earlier remedial level narrative. "Not for a Year," a personal experience narrative about the narrator's reaction to the father's departure for military duty, employs only four instances of External Evaluative Commentary, but twenty-nine instances of Internal Evaluative Commentary or Sentence-Internal Evaluative devices.

NOT FOR A YEAR
(freshman composition narrative)

It was such a [sunny, breezy, fairyland (II-A-1)] day. I heard kids laughing and playing softball in the street. [It was one of those days when you want to just shrug off responsibilities, go outside, and do nothing except be alive. I-A] But our house was different that day. A [gloomy (II-A-1),] almost [visible gray cloud (II-B-6)] hung in the atmosphere. [And tension--there was tension (II-A-2)] on top of the gloom, and it [wasn't (II-B-2)] just me. It was the whole family. For my father was leaving

us to go to Thailand for a year with the Air Force. A year, [it is such a long time (I-A).] As we went about our business, each getting ready to go to the airport, we all had our own thoughts. I [didn't (II-B-2)] yet [really (II-A-1)] comprehend what was happening. I mean, I knew we [wouldn't (II-B-2)] see him for a year, but it [really (II-A-1)] [didn't (II-B-2)] hit me then. Mom knew. She was moody, edgy, very nervous. When everyone was ready, and the clock approached the long [dreaded (II-A-1)] time we had known [would have to come (II-B-5),] we drove to the airport. The silence was distinctly audible--broken only by a whimper from Mom every now and then, a sign that the [dam (II-B-6)] was getting ready to give way.

Upon arrival, we all climbed out of the car. Dad checked in and we all went down to the coffeeshop. Mom was still fighting off the [downpour (II-B-6).] We sat there talking of [almost (II-A-1)] trivial things. [What magic words do you say to someone that you [won't (II-B-1,2)] see for a year?] (II-B-4)

My stomach was upset and the sound of planes heightened the tension. With each announcement of the planes arrivals and departures, I held my breath. ["Don't let this be the one."] (II-B-1, II-B-3) All these people walking past us. They [don't (II-B-2)] know. And if I told them, a majority probably [wouldn't (II-B-2,5)] care. They announce another [threatening (II-A-1)] departure. ["That's me."] (I-B-1) Dad tried to sound happy, strong, courage-giving. A pain shot through me. [This was <u>it</u>. I had known <u>it</u> was coming, but <u>it</u> (II-A-2)] was always tomorrow, never now. The tears stung as they welled in my eyes. The pain in my stomach was constant now. Mom was crying. When I hugged him, I knew I [couldn't (II-B-2,5)] do it again for a year. A kiss, never before taken or given with much thought, now seemed too quick, and unable to compensate for all those taken for granted.

[His walk toward the silver bird, <u>his wave</u> (II-A-2)] before taking his last step into the plane was [like a knife going through me (II-B-6).] The last time we [would (II-B-5)] see him for a year. Then the motors started--[so loud--so angering! (II-A-1)] We saw him wave through the little round window. ["Bye Dad."] (I-B-2) The sting in my eyes had moved to my nose. Finally the plane boosted itself off the ground into the air. We watched it until not even a [dot (II-B-6)] in the [blue (II-B-6)] was left.

Evaluative Commentary--5

Sentence Internal Evaluators--29

Words--485

Numbers and letters in parentheses refer to types of evaluators as identified on pp. 4-8.

In this narrative, the negative and the future occur most frequently of all processing signals and affect the way the narrative provides cues for its own processing. For example, in lines 22 and 23,

> All these people walking past me. They don't know. And
> if I told them, a majority wouldn't care,

we find two negatives and one future. To process the lines, the reader must juxtapose what the crowd at the airport does know with the hypothetical consequences that might occur if they were to know the narrator's situation. By employing the future and the negative, the narrator requires the reader to process the text quite differently than if the narrator had stated explicitly, "The crowd was indifferent to my feelings." Furthermore, the use of the conditional and the negatives produces a particular effect regarding the narrator and his attitude toward the reader not possible in an explicit translation. Gerald Prince's remarks about reading interludes help explain this difference in effect created by internal as opposed to explicit commentary. Although Prince is referring to reading interludes, I believe his analysis is applicable to all the types of evaluation I have treated here.

> Reading interludes help define the narrator and his relationship with the narratee. To begin with, the number, kind, and the complexity of reading operations performed by a narrator contribute to his characterization as pedantic or unassuming, humble, or condescending, cunning or straight forward, etc. Moreover, they help delineate the audience he is addressing and specify whether he respects it, is well disposed toward it, or considers himself to be infinitely superior; whether he feels it needs having locutions explained--even very ordinary ones--and certain symbolic possibilities made clear; whether he thinks it longs for periodic summaries

> of what has been presented and periodic reminders of what enigmas are to be solved and what clues may allow for their solution. Finally, the distribution of reading interludes may indicate a change in the narrator's attitude vis-a'-vis his narrattee; if he stops making metalinguistic statements after having multiplied them, for instance, it may be because he has come to realize that his narratee is perfectly able to do without them.[5]

If we now compare the remedial narrative with the freshman narrative in light of Prince's remarks, leaving aside momentarily judgments about the quality of either narrative, we can conclude that the remedial narrative, which employs a relatively high number of Evaluative Commentary statements, implies that the reader will require explicit statements of meaning. In the freshman narrative, which employs many more Sentence-Internal evaluators than Explicit Commentary statements, we can conclude, as well, that the narrator is revealing a certain attitude toward the readers' ability to process embedded meaning structures. In short, if Prince is correct, the incidence of embedded evaluators as opposed to explicit commentary makes a statement about the narrators' attitudes toward narratees inscribed within the texts. And this relationship, because it establishes certain assumptions and premises the text makes about its own readability, guides and determines the range of meanings actual readers may make.

Let us return now to the question previously set aside about the quality of the two narratives. As student efforts, how would we judge them? Does the greater incidence of embedded evaluators make the freshman narrative a superior piece. Lobov suggests that the more deeply embedded the evaluator, the more effective the narrative. Yet, in my judgment, the twenty-nine Sentence-Internal evaluators in the freshman essay does not make it a significantly better or more effective narrative than the remedial one, which employs only ten. Both are

unsophisticated narratives that we might say lack sufficient detail, character development, and interest. Each lacks a sense of pacing, etc. Aside from these objections and others, which I will return to shortly, there is something, I believe, related to the use of evaluators that does have a bearing on our judgment of the narratives.

To illustrate what I mean by use, let us turn to the third and last sample narrative, a passage from Philip Roth's "Defender of the Faith." The passage occurs near the end of the story, after Sargeant Marx has written the illegal passes for Halpern, Grossbart, and Feisbein.[6] A Jew himself, Marx is pulled between loyalty to the Jewish family life that Grossbart continually exploits and his loyalty to the military and its defense of Jews on a larger scale. Marx can see the incompatibility of the loyalties and, in this passage, he tries to sort out his feelings toward Grossbart and his demands for special treatment.

DEFENDER OF THE FAITH
(Philip Roth)

That afternoon, in a bar in Joplin, I drank beer and listened with half an ear to the Cardinal game. I tried to look squarely at what I'd become involved in, and began to wonder if perhaps the struggle with Grossbart [wasn't (II-B-2)] as much my fault as his. [What was I that I had to muster generous feelings? (II-B-4)] [Who was I to have been feeling so grudging, so tight-hearted? (II-B-4)] After all, I [wasn't (II-B-2)] being asked to move the world. [Had I a right, then, or a reason, to clamp down on Grossbart, when that meant clamping down on Halpern too? (II-B-4)] [And Fishbein--that ugly, agreeable soul? (II-B-4)] Out of the many recollections of my childhood that had tumbled over me these past few days, I heard my grand mother's voice: ["What are you making a tsimmes?" (I-B-1)] It was what she [would (II-B-5)] ask my mother when, say, I had cut myself doing something I [shouldn't (II-B-5)] have done, and her daughter was busy bawling me out. I needed a hug and a kiss, and my mother [would (II-B-5)] moralize. But my grandmother knew--mercy overrides justice. I [should (II-B-5)] have known it, too. [Who was Nathan Marx to be such a penny pincher with kindness? (II-B-4)] Surely, [I thought (I-B-1),] the Messiah himself--if He [should ever come (II-B-5)] [won't (II-B-2)] niggle over [nickels and dimes (II-B-6).] God willing, [he'll (II-B-1)] hug and kiss.

Evaluative Commentary--2
Sentence Internal Evaluators--15
Words--222

Numbers and letters in parentheses refer to types of evaluators as identified on pp. 4-8.

We notice, as with the freshman theme, a rather high incidence of Sentence-Internal evaluators. It is not, however, the frequency of these evaluators so much as their interaction that makes this narrative passage superior to the student samples. The concentration of questions in lines 2-8 include four interrogatives and one implied question. Although the questions reflect back on Marx's attitude toward Grossbart, as Sentence-Internal evaluators (comparators), each question projects actual past feelings against reassessment in the present. The present introspection, "Who was I that I had to muster generous feelings? Who was I to have been feeling so grudging, so tight hearted?" function as a hypothetical foreground which is processed against the background of his actual behavior.

This juxtaposition of actual behavior vs. reassessment of behavior is then set against the past of childhood recollection, constituting a layering or doubling of comparators. Employing conditionals (should) and a negative (not) in line 8-13, the childhood recollection describes Marx's actual behavior as opposed to the hypothetical behavior his mother would have preferred. Although different types of Comparators are used in the opening questions and in the childhood recollection, together they function as an analogy. By moving back and forth between what he had done and what he feels he should have done as a child and as a soldier, the processing structures expose Marx's moral dilemma or conflict. With line 13, the analogy closes; the narrator's conclusion, "I should have known it, too." applies to both the childhood and the present.

It would seem then that this more sophisticated use--the layering or doubling of Sentence Internal Comparators--not frequently of evaluators, is what marks a significant difference between the Roth passage and the freshman and remedial narratives. And it is this difference, in part, that affects our judgment of the quality of the narrative.

Of course I have presented only three examples and my argument must remain speculative until a larger number of narratives can be tested. However, I do believe I have shown that evaluators, both External Commentary and Sentence-Internal devices, do function as signals restricting how a text is to be processed by readers. These signals, which clarify the premises on which a text stands and which attribute a certain function, meaning, or importance to a narrative passage, affect decisively the range of any given reader's reading and response.

We can conclude then, that if textual processing signals help delineate the reader inscribed in the text and if the interaction of these signals affect the quality of the narrative, the taxonomy of processing signals I have presented could be of value in the teaching of narrative prose. We have seen how a narrator's method of evaluation produces a range of evaluative affect. Introducing the concept of processing signals into the teaching of narrative could help writers become aware of an entire repertoire of these effects and could provide writers with a heuristic for structuring evaluation into the text.

NOTES

[1]Gerald Prince, "Notes on the Text as Reader," in The Reader in the Text, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 234.

[2]Ibid., p. 237.

[3]Mary Louise Pratt in Toward A Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1977), pp. 38-78, details the similar function of oral and written narratives. Pratt employs Labov's taxonomy of narrative evolution in order to argue that both are utterances of the same type. While Pratt emphasizes the similarity in use of oral and written narrative, I wish here to stress the similar formal properties of the two narrative types.

[4]William Labov, Language in the Inner City (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972). Evaluative Commentary is one type of narrative structure discussed by Labov in this work. All evaluator types included on pages 4-8 of this manuscript are drawn from Language in the Inner City.

[5]Prince, p. 236.

[6]Phillip Roth, "Defender of the Faith," from Goodbye Columbus and Five Short Stories (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), p. 193.